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A critical look at Dr. David Pritchard's "Viewpoint Diversity in Cross-Owned Newspapers and Television Stations: A Study of News Coverage of the 2000 Presidential Campaign"

In 2001, the Federal Communications Commission began a review of its Broadcast-Newspaper Cross-Ownership Rule, which, in the interest of promoting viewpoint diversity, prohibits a company from owning a broadcast station and newspaper in the same market. This review is mandated by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which requires the FCC to "repeal or modify any regulation it determines to be no longer in the public interest." In support of the review process, the FCC commissioned a study⁽¹⁾ of viewpoint diversity in companies which are grand-fathered, or granted exceptions to the ownership rule. The purpose of the study is to provide an empirical measure of the influence of ownership on the excepted newspaper and TV station combinations. The executive summary of the study concludes in this manner:

"The limited number of observations in this study prevents us from drawing firm or sweeping conclusions about the implications of our findings. However, for the markets studied, the data suggest that common ownership of a newspaper and a television station in a community does not result in a predictable pattern of news coverage and commentary about important political events in the commonly owned outlets."

Though the statement of this conclusion is tentative and applied to a small number of markets, it supports a finding that the media ownership rule is unnecessary because diversity has been found in the cases excepted from the rule.

In light of the potential impact of this study on the FCC review process, it is appropriate to ask to what extent the study supports the above conclusion. Among many errors of design and methodology in the study, two are sufficiently severe to demonstrate that the conclusions are not supported by the study. Details of these two flaws follow.

The first of the errors is related to asking: "is this collection of viewpoints diverse?" As asked, this is not a meaningful question because an absolute scale of diversity does not exist. The meaningful question to ask is: "is this collection of viewpoints more diverse than another collection?" Thus the flaw is that only one set of viewpoints is measured - those of news organizations owned by the same company. No data has been collected on a control sample which would enable the author to say that the viewpoints expressed by commonly-owned news organizations are more or less diverse than those expressed where there is no common ownership. Without that control sample, it is not possible to test any hypothesis related to viewpoint diversity.

The second flaw arises from the manner in which the author concludes that two viewpoints are diverse. For each commonly-owned pair of newspapers and TV stations, he computes a number called "slant"(2). He then performs a test of significance known as a "two-tailed, independent-samples t-test." This test tells him, with what confidence, each slant is different from the other. He concludes that if the test tells him a pair of slants is "statistically different" with a confidence greater than 68%, then that pair is "diverse." The error here is that his slants are not statistical in nature, and thus using a statistical test to draw conclusions about them is invalid. To illustrate this point, consider the slant of a broadcast station. Pritchard takes all the coded items from a station and computes a single slant based on the number of items. He then computes a different slant based on the length of those items. It is the average of these two different slants that he then inputs to his t-tests to compare with a slant similarly arrived at for newspapers. Two measures of a quantity - be it slant, distance, time, etc - do not make a distribution!

With neither a control sample nor a proper data analysis, it is not possible to test any hypothesis whatsoever. And without the ability to test a hypothesis, no conclusions - no matter how couched in a rhetoric of "the data suggest" - can be validly drawn. Thus, Pritchard's results have no more empirical basis than his opinions.

In a recent press release, chairman Powell stated that the FCC "is committed to developing a set of media ownership rules that are internally consistent, tailored to the modern media marketplace and empirically justified."(3) In light of this goal, the incomplete nature of the current study warrants it's rejection from the decision making process. The empirical justification of a rule can not be arrived at using the anecdote-based findings of Dr. Pritchard's study.

(1)http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-226838A7.pdf

(2) Details of the calculation of slant are provided in :

David Pritchard, A Tale of Three Cities: "Diverse and Antagonistic" Information in Situations of Local Newspaper/Broadcast Cross-Ownership, 54 Fed. Comm. L.J. 31 (2001).

(3)http://hraunfoss.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/DOC-229209A1.pdf